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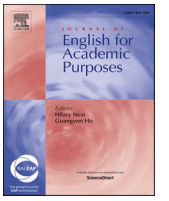

Exploring PhD students' utilization of generative AI in academic writing for publication purposes: Insights for EAP

Chenze Wu [a], Benjamin Luke Moorhouse [b,*], Yuwei Wan [a], Meixin Wu [a]

[a] Department of Education and Psychology, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China
[b] Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

The use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is creating new innovative processes and approaches to writing for publication that have implications for EAP. Given that the appropriate utilization of GenAI tools is under researched, existing EAP curricula might inadequately prepare students to appropriately incorporate GenAI tools into their academic writing practices for publication. The current study explored L2 PhD students' understanding of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes and their underlying reasons. A two-stage design, including a survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews, was employed. Data included 63 survey responses and 22 semi-structured interviews among L2 PhD students in arts, humanities, and social sciences at a Hong Kong university. The findings suggested divergent perceptions about the appropriateness of GenAI use at each stage of academic writing. Furthermore, although most participants highlighted the importance of maintaining transparency and acknowledged the necessity of AI declaration, about sixty percent opted not to declare their AI usage in actual publishing practices. The study sheds light on the use of GenAI by L2 PhD students in their writing for publication processes, and their understanding of the appropriate use of GenAI for publishing. The article provides six recommendations for EAP instructors and course organizers to help L2 students navigate the complexities of using GenAI appropriately and transparently in academic writing for publication.

1. Introduction

It has been widely recognized that the number of journal publications is one of the most important indicators for evaluating the academic performance of academics, research students, and higher education institutes (Cadez et al., 2017). However, publishing an article in a legitimate peer-reviewed journal is known to be challenging for many PhD students (Indrayadi, 2023). It is particularly challenging for L2 writers of English – given the need to be highly proficient in discipline-specific academic writing (Melekhina & Kazachikhina, 2019; Shamsi & Osam, 2022; Zhang et al., 2025a). L2 writers may experience multiple obstacles to writing, including limited knowledge of academic writing conventions (Wan & Moorhouse, 2023), lack of individualized timely support from their instructors (Shamsi & Osam, 2022), and unfamiliarity with journal expectations and processes. In addition, they may not receive EAP

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* Corresponding author. CMC-M8092, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.
E-mail addresses: chenze_wu@life.hkbu.edu.hk (C. Wu), bmoorhou@cityu.edu.hk (B.L. Moorhouse), yuweiwan@life.hkbu.edu.hk (Y. Wan), 24484253@life.hkbu.edu.hk (M. Wu).

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courses or training pertaining to writing for publication (Maher et al., 2014; Melekhina & Kazachikhina, 2019).

Given the potential affordances of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools, there has been speculation that they could assist L2 PhD students in addressing the challenges they face in academic writing, particularly in writing for publication (Belcher, 2024; Kim et al., 2025). Indeed, they have many affordances that could make them useful assistive tools in the academic writing processes of L2 writers.

Despite their utility, there is a lack of consensus regarding how these tools should be used in writing for publication and how EAP courses should respond to their development in their curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The rapid development of GenAI has outpaced our understanding of its ethical appropriateness. Additionally, there are limited empirical studies examining the appropriate uses of these tools in academic writing (Belcher, 2024). Given that L2 PhD students are under pressure but often find it challenging, there is the likelihood that they are exploring ways to integrate GenAI into their practices. This creates a complex and risky environment for L2 PhD students. Indeed, the number of retractions of academic papers is on the rise, some of which are due to "signs of undisclosed use of artificial intelligence" (Van Noorden, 2023a). Retractions can be career-ending for new early career academics (Memon et al., 2025), as well as damage the reputation of their host institutions. Therefore, having an EAP course that addresses GenAI in writing for publication is paramount. However, to design such a curriculum, we need a better understanding of the ways L2 PhD students are using GenAI and their views towards appropriate use.

In response to calls (e.g., Belcher, 2024; Yeo, 2023) to explore L2 writers' perspectives on the appropriate uses of GenAI tools, the current study aimed to explore PhD students' understanding of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes and the underlying reasons for having these understandings. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are PhD students' understanding of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes?
RQ2: Why do PhD students have these understanding of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes?

The study can inform the development of EAP learning outcomes, curricula, instruction, and assessments that reflect the realities of GenAI use and the needs of L2 PhD students engaged in writing for publication.

1.1. Doctoral students and publications

Various factors influence the need for PhD students to publish, including graduation requirements, the competitive academic job market, the desire to contribute to their field, and the ambition to enhance their academic standing (Wu, 2025).

Increasingly, universities in many contexts worldwide require PhD students to publish their research findings in academic journals prior to graduation (Ho, 2017; Shamsi & Osam, 2022). This has also amplified the need for PhD students to develop the skills and knowledge needed to write for publication in their disciplines (Quan et al., 2023). The growth in PhD graduates has also intensified the competition for academic positions (Horta & Li, 2023). For example, Chinese universities increasingly prioritize the quantity and quality of publications when hiring new faculty and prioritize research duties over teaching duties (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, many PhD students are driven by a strong desire to contribute to their academic field because they tend to be passionate about their area of study and are eager to advance knowledge through original contributions to their field (Phillips & Johnson, 2022). Publishing articles in international journals can provide PhD students with the opportunities to engage in the academic community of their domain and enhance their academic reputation (Shamsi & Osam, 2022), as well as expand their professional network.

With the influences of this publication-centric focus, it is understandable that L2 PhD students may turn to GenAI tools to assist them with their academic writing practices.

1.2. L2 students' challenges in academic writing and EAP provision

L2 academic writing is challenging for novice researchers (Huang, 2010; Shamsi & Osam, 2022). Recent studies have found various kinds of challenges encountered by L2 postgraduate students in writing for scholarly publication (Habibie & Hyland, 2019; Odena & Burgess, 2017). For example, Shamsi and Osam (2022) explored the challenges in academic publications of L2 PhD students from a university in Cyprus. They found that L2 PhD students are confronted with a wide range of challenges, such as insufficient English language proficiency, lack of support from the university and supervisors, and difficulties in finding meaningful research topics. Similarly, Moorhouse and Wan's (2023) study in a Hong Kong university found that L2 postgraduate students encountered many language difficulties in academic writing, including appropriate use of academic writing conventions, the negative transfer of L1 writing patterns, and unfamiliar genres.

Taken together, L2 PhD students face diverse challenges in academic writing for publication. In most contexts, EAP courses play a crucial role in equipping students of all subjects and disciplines with the necessary knowledge and skills for effective academic writing to navigate the difficulties and complexities of scholarly communication and avoid potential academic misconduct such as plagiarism (James, 2023). In some contexts, there are EAP provisions for L2 PhD students; however, limited studies explore the value of these provisions and how effective they are in supporting L2 PhD students in writing for publication (Horta & Li, 2023).

Furthermore, given the rapid developments of GenAI, scholars have argued that EAP courses should also play a role in equipping L2 students with the skills to effectively and appropriately utilize GenAI in their academic writing (Kohnke, 2024; McArthur, 2023). A survey of 75 PhD students from 19 universities across the UK indicated that the participants believed the appropriate use of GenAI is

likely to become an essential skill for future researchers, and they expressed willingness to receive training on appropriate use (English et al., 2025).

However, the current EAP provision may fall short of equipping students with the capability to appropriately integrate GenAI tools in academic writing since there is no consensus on the appropriate GenAI use (Ngo & Hastie, 2025). Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate L2 PhD students use of GenAI in writing, with the goal of informing the development of future EAP courses by proposing a list of recommendations. The findings could guide future EAP courses in establishing guidelines and providing explicit instructions on the proper use of AI, enabling students to develop a clear understanding of responsible GenAI integration in academic work.

1.3. Affordance of generative AI on academic writing

Recent research suggests that GenAI tools have the potential to support L2 academic writing (Barrot, 2023; Foung et al., 2024; Su et al., 2023). These tools can assist students in brainstorming ideas, providing writing outlines, recommending research topics, offering feedback for refinements, and proofreading for language use and grammatical accuracy (Hadan et al., 2024; Su et al., 2023; Zhang, Li, & Wu, 2025). A qualitative study by Widiati et al. (2023) investigated L2 teachers' perceptions of GenAI tools' impact on students' writing quality across four Indonesian universities. The study revealed a consensus among teachers regarding the positive influence of GenAI, particularly in enhancing content and structure in students' writing.

These perceptual perspectives are supported by recent intervention studies. For example, a randomized controlled experiment was employed by Lo et al. (2025) to investigate the impacts of GenAI-generated feedback on the essay quality and revision outcomes of university students in Hong Kong. Results indicated that students receiving GenAI feedback demonstrated significant improvements in writing quality, alongside increased motivation and engagement during revisions. Similarly, Mahapatra (2024) carried out a quasi-experimental study in an intensive academic writing course for science and engineering students at an Indian university to examine the effects of GenAI feedback on university students' academic writing performance. The study found that GenAI feedback significantly enhanced university students' academic writing quality, and students expressed highly positive attitudes towards GenAI use in academic writing.

Overall, recent empirical evidence underscores the effectiveness of GenAI tools in supporting academic writing, suggesting that they can offer reliable and practical solutions for enhancing writing quality.

1.4. Current realities of academic publishing caused by generative AI

Academic publishing is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the widespread adoption of GenAI. Many publishers, academic databases, and research software have integrated GenAI functionalities to support various stages of manuscript preparation (Moorhouse, Nejadghanbar, & Yeo, 2025; Yin & Chapelle, 2025). A recent survey conducted by *Nature* among approximately 1600 researchers across multiple disciplines revealed that nearly one-third of researchers have employed GenAI to draft manuscripts (Van Noorden & Perkel, 2023). Further, a large-scale linguistic analysis of papers in various domains showed that up to 20 % of recent publications show evidence of GenAI-assisted writing (Liang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the use of GenAI tools is becoming increasingly normalized for academic publishing.

However, the widespread GenAI use has led to uncritical and, at times, unethical practices. Studies of journal retractions and AI footprints (e.g., "*certainly, here is a possible introduction for your topic* …") showed that many authors utilize GenAI to produce or organize content without proper use or disclosure, which resulted in potential "research waste" and erosion of academic trust and integrity (Szudarski, 2025; Yao et al., 2025, pp. 1–13). Editors and reviewers also report low-value or even fabricated submissions, and this further undermines the credibility of academic communication and threatens the quality and reliability of published research (Moorhouse, Consoli, & Curle, 2025).

In this complex context, the role of journal policies and editorial guidelines is crucial in directing appropriate GenAI use. Yet, these policies and guidelines remain fragmented and often inconsistent. Less than half of journals offer explicit GenAI-specific policies, and existing guidance ranges from narrow bans to vague recommendations about disclosure (Yin & Chapelle, 2025). This inconsistency creates opaqueness about acceptable GenAI practices, especially for early-career scholars, which complicates the ethical decision-making for academic publishing. The rapid advancement of GenAI also outpaced scholarly understanding of ethical appropriateness and the ability to explore these tools empirically (Belcher, 2024). Moreover, social stigma surrounding GenAI use further complicates transparency. Researchers who seek GenAI for assistance are often viewed as lazy, incompetent, or dishonest, and this consequently leads to emotional burdens and a tendency to conceal actual GenAI use in manuscript preparation (Bao & Zeng, 2025; Ebadi et al., 2025). However, such non-disclosure of GenAI use may result in issues of retractions, which could be detrimental to one's academic career (Lei et al., 2024; Van Noorden, 2023b).

Collectively, although it seems that GenAI tools have been widely adopted to support academic publishing and normalized within scholars' writing practices, journal policies and guidelines remain ambiguous and inconsistent. This uncertainty leaves many researchers unsure about what constitutes appropriate and responsible use (Moorhouse, Nejadghanbar, & Yeo, 2025).

As key stakeholders in academic publishing, the views and practices of L2 PhD students need to be understood. At the same time, EAP programmes and courses need to understand L2 PhD students' current conceptions so that they can better prepare them for the complexities of writing for publication in the GenAI age.

2. Methods

This mixed-methods study employed a two-stage design to explore L2 PhD students' perceived appropriateness of using GenAI tools in academic writing for publication purposes in the fields of arts, humanities, and social sciences at a university in Hong Kong. Compared with a single method, a two-stage design with a survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews could help researchers have an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions and beliefs about their use of GenAI (Morse, 2010).

2.1. Context and participants

The current study was conducted in a public university in Hong Kong. It offers a 4-year PhD programme. The university had a total of 277 PhD students when the study was conducted. Most of the students originating from Mainland China. The programme includes a taught component, where students are required to take one EAP course designed to help develop their academic writing skills. Amongst the graduation requirements is the need to publish an article as a first or corresponding author in an international peer-reviewed journal. This means all the PhD students at this university are preparing for or have published an article as a first/corresponding author.

To recruit participants, an information sheet was sent to all 277 PhD students. 63 of them agreed to complete the survey (a participation rate of 22.74 %). Table 1 includes the demographic information of the survey respondents. The gender ratio, age range, and disciplines broadly align with the PhD population in the institution. 43 (68.25 %) of them have published at least one article, and 20 (31.75 %) suggested that they are in the stage of preparing or writing manuscripts for publication. In terms of the frequency of using GenAI tools in academic writing, 2 (3.17 %) chose "never." 10 (15.87 %) chose "rarely," 31 (49.21 %) chose "sometimes," 14 (22.22 %) chose "often," and 6 (9.52 %) chose "always".

The survey offered the participants the opportunity to self-nominate for follow-up interviews. 31 self-nominated, with 22 agreeing and participating in the follow-up interviews. The majority of the nominees were first- or second-year students. This may be because third- and fourth-year students were engaged in overseas attachments or preparing their dissertations for submission. Among the 22 interviewees, 15 identified as female and 7 as male. They were from nine disciplines in arts, humanities, and social sciences. Most interviewees had prior experience with academic publication, and only six reported having no scholarly publications. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's human research ethics committee. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and process, and they provided active consent to participate.

2.2. Data collection tools and process

2.2.1. Survey

A survey was purposefully developed to explore PhD students' perceptions of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes based on a comprehensive review of literature related to GenAI and academic writing (e.g., Barrett & Pack, 2023; Barrot, 2023; Hadan et al., 2024; Silver et al., 2023; Su et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2024; Tribble, 1996; Zhao, 2024). The survey consists of three parts: (1) demographic information; (2) 17 Likert-type scale items; (3) 3 multiple-choice questions (see Appendix I for the survey items). These items were categorized into five aspects: (1) conceptualizing, (2) drafting, (3) revising and editing, (4) transparency and honesty, and (5) declaration of AI use. The initial survey items underwent evaluation and refinement by two professors in language education to enhance the face validity and relevance of the items (Kallio et al., 2016). Subsequently, the

Table 1
Demographic information of the survey participants.

		Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	15 (23.81 %)
	Female	47 (74.60 %)
	Undisclosed	1 (1.59 %)
Age range	22 to 26	24 (38.10 %)
	27 to 31	29 (46.03 %)
	32 or above	10 (15.87 %)
Grade	First-year PhD	39.68 % (n = 25)
	Second-year PhD	26.98 % (n = 17)
	Third-year PhD	17.46 % (n = 11)
	Fourth-year PhD	15.87 % (n = 10)
Discipline	Education and Psychology	9
	Social Work	9
	Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Studies	4
	Government and International Studies	3
	Film Studies	4
	Sports, Physical Education, and Health	9
	Sociology	5
	Communication	4
	History	5
	Geography	11

survey was piloted with eight PhD students, and revisions were made based on their feedback to improve its clarity and readability. In this study, the Likert-type scale items achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, which indicated a satisfactory level of reliability.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were employed to investigate the underlying reasons for participants' perceptions regarding the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publishing. This approach, as highlighted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), allows researchers to ask questions more flexibly based on the interviewees' real-time responses and thus provides a more in-depth exploration of the matter. An interview guide was purposefully developed based on participants' responses to the survey, which could help the researchers have a more in-depth understanding of their perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018) (see Appendix II for the interview guide). The interview guide was assessed by two professors in language education and refined according to their recommendations to enhance its face validity and relevance (Kallio et al., 2016). It was then piloted with three PhD students, and further refinements were made to improve the clarity and readability.

Participants were given the option to respond in either English or Chinese, according to their preference. Interviews, ranging from 30 to 48 min, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for further analysis. To enhance the credibility of the findings, "member checks" were conducted (Shenton, 2004). Participants were provided with the transcripts to verify that their responses accurately reflected their intended meanings.

2.3. Data analysis

The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the frequency and the percentage of participants who expressed the appropriateness or agreement on each item. This could help the researchers have a more holistic understanding of participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of GenAI use in academic writing.

The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed inductively through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts several times to familiarize themselves with the data. Each researcher coded half of the interview data independently and attended a group meeting to carefully discuss the codes they had found, checking consistency and addressing discrepancies. Then, a coding scheme was designed through a thorough discussion among the researchers. In light of the coding scheme, each researcher was allocated to code one-fourth of the data. The coding scheme was refined further after resolving the minor discrepancies among the researchers. The rest of the data was coded, and debriefing meetings were arranged to discuss and finalize the themes. The finalized themes were then categorized under the stages of writing (Tribble, 1996), declaration of AI use (Tan et al., 2025), as well as AI detection tools (Silver, 2023). Table 2 presents an example of the final theme, 'reasons for considering GenAI use in revising and editing appropriate'.

3. Findings

The findings were categorized into five sections, including (1) conceptualizing, (2) drafting, (3) revising and editing, (4) transparency, honesty and declaration of AI use, and (5) inaccurate and unreliable results of AI detection tools. For each section, we began by presenting survey data that elucidates PhD students' perceptions of the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes. Subsequently, we examined the interview data to uncover the underlying reasons behind these perceptions, providing a nuanced understanding of their perspectives at each stage.

Table 2
An example of one main theme with its sub-themes from the interview data.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Examples of interview extracts
Reasons for considering GenAI use in revising and editing appropriate	Language editing with unchanged meanings	*GenAI tools do not revise the original ideas and logic. They merely play a role of language refinement.* (Emily) *We may not good enough in English, but AI can help us realize language polishing. Furthermore, it is just language polishing and do not change the core of our writing, namely our ideas and minds. This does not violate any academic principles, so it should be accepted.* (Charlotte)
	Bridging language gaps between L1 and L2 speakers	*It is 'unfair' for non-English natives to use English for journal publications … GenAI can help L2 writers to express their meanings more authentically and clearly, so this "unfairness" can be significantly reduced.* (Michael) *As L2 learners, our language deficiency is inborn. GenAI can exactly make up this disadvantage to make our writing looks like written by L1 speaker.* (Jason)
	24/7 availability and complementary to supervisors.	*When my supervisor is tightly scheduled and does not have time to provide detailed suggestions, GenAI tools can serve as a personalized language tutor to assist with revisions and language editing.* (Yvonne) *Supervisors are more likely to focus on the overall ideas and research directions and focus less on language-related issues, while GenAI tools can offer me more suggestions for language refinement.* (Albert)

3.1. Conceptualizing

Overall, from the survey results, it was evident that participants' perspectives on the application of GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes diverge greatly in the conceptualizing stage (see Table 3). 39.7 % believed that using GenAI to generate ideas is appropriate or completely appropriate, while 33.4 % argued that this is inappropriate or completely inappropriate. Although nearly half of the participants (47.6 %) felt that it was somewhat inappropriate or completely inappropriate to use writing outlines generated GenAI tools, others were neutral or viewed it as appropriate. Contrasting opinions were also recognized regarding the utilization of GenAI to suggest potential research topics, with 33.3 % appropriate or completely appropriate, and 31.8 % inappropriate or completely inappropriate. Most participants (87.3 %) argued that using literature identified by GenAI tools such as Consensus (an AI-powered academic search engine) without verification is inappropriate or completely inappropriate. Similarly, using a summary of articles provided by GenAI tools without checking the original sources was also regarded as inappropriate or completely inappropriate by 90.5 % of participants.

During the interview, participants suggested that using GenAI tools for academic writing at the conceptualizing stage is appropriate. They believed that GenAI can be helpful to offer new ideas and perspectives, facilitating the brainstorming process. Participants likened brainstorming with GenAI to using other tools such as Google Search or engaging with teachers and peers, therefore asserting that this practice is entirely suitable. Annie (a second-year PhD student in social work) explained "Enlightened by GenAI tools and enlightened by my supervisor were all enlightenment. If I can brainstorm with my supervisor, there is no reason I cannot brainstorm with GenAI tools". Participants also indicated that academic writing often follows fixed patterns, which means using GenAI to generate outlines could save time and enhance efficiency.

Yvonne (a third-year PhD student in education and psychology) elaborated, "In most cases, the outline for academic writing such as literature review or methodology is fixed. Seeking help from GenAI can save time, and this is similar to finding other sources to offer you outlines".

Conversely, the remaining participants argued that employing GenAI tools for academic writing at the conceptualizing stage is inappropriate. Many participants believed that ideas should originate from the researchers themselves rather than from GenAI. John (a third-year PhD student in film studies) said, "If you are a scholar, your ideas and perspectives should come from your observation instead of relying on the assistance of digital tools such as GenAI".

Nancy (a second-year PhD student in social work), believed that using GenAI to generate ideas for academic writing should be considered plagiarism because of its negative impact on the originality of ideas. Furthermore, many participants raised concerns regarding the quality, timeliness, and authenticity of ideas generated by GenAI. They believed that GenAI's ideas were generally superficial, and the databases used by GenAI to generate ideas are not updated in real time as well.

Charlotte (a first-year PhD student in sociology) questioned, "I want to know where the ideas of GenAI came from since they did not offer clear information sources. Similar doubts and concerns about quality and authenticity were also expressed about the use of GenAI in searching and summarizing literature. For example, Michael (a first-year PhD student in sports, psychical education, and health) explained "We do not know the underlying rationales of GenAI's literature searching and summarizing process. It's not transparent".

Some interviewees suggested that their limited ability in crafting detailed and effective prompts may contribute to the poor quality of GenAI responses. Moreover, GenAI tools were incapable of generating high-quality ideas for all disciplines. Grace (a first-year PhD student in history) highlighted that "Using GenAI to generate ideas is unhelpful or even harmful for the domain of history since the databases of GenAI are prone to be related to the current era and include limited information about the past". Additionally, some participants, such as Joey (a first-year PhD student in education and psychology), expressed concerns that excessive reliance on GenAI tools for academic writing could be detrimental to the development of critical and innovative thinking skills.

3.2. Drafting

According to the survey results, divergences in participants' perspectives of the application of GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes were identified during the drafting stage (see Table 4). While a large proportion of participants believed that using GenAI to give suggestions on their manuscript at the lexical level is appropriate or completely appropriate, some expressed

Table 3
Perceived appropriateness at conceptualizing stage.

Use of GenAI	Completely inappropriate	Inappropriate	Neutral	Appropriate	Completely appropriate
Generate ideas	10 (15.9 %)	11 (17.5 %)	17 (27.0 %)	21 (33.3 %)	4 (6.4 %)
Offer outlines	14 (22.2 %)	16 (25.4 %)	15 (23.8 %)	9 (14.3 %)	9 (14.3 %)
Provide research topics	12 (19.1 %)	8 (12.7 %)	22 (34.9 %)	13 (20.6 %)	8 (12.7 %)
Search articles and use these articles directly without verification	49 (77.8 %)	6 (9.5 %)	4 (6.4 %)	4 (6.4 %)	0 (0 %)
Summarize articles and use the information summarized directly without verification	49 (77.8 %)	8 (12.7 %)	4 (6.4 %)	2 (3.2 %)	0 (0 %)

Table 4
Perceived appropriateness at drafting stage.

Use of GenAI	Completely inappropriate	Inappropriate	Neutral	Appropriate	Completely appropriate
Give suggestions about lexical use while drafting	3 (4.8 %)	5 (7.9 %)	7 (11.1 %)	27 (42.9 %)	21 (33.3 %)
Assist in paraphrasing to improve readability while drafting	3 (4.8 %)	3 (4.8 %)	8 (12.7 %)	32 (50.8 %)	17 (27.0 %)
Reconstruct sentences to make it more authentic while drafting	2 (3.2 %)	7 (11.1 %)	10 (15.9 %)	27 (42.9 %)	17 (27.0 %)
Generate sentences and directly use them in manuscript without revisions	33 (52.4 %)	15 (23.8 %)	11 (17.5 %)	4 (6.4 %)	0 (0.0 %)

neutral (11.1 %) or inappropriate (12.7 %) views on this practice. Most participants (77.8 %) believed that it is appropriate or completely appropriate to use GenAI to paraphrase the texts they wrote to improve the language quality of their manuscript, although others remained neutral or considered it inappropriate. Using GenAI to rephrase the sentences they wrote was perceived as appropriate or completely appropriate by nearly 70 % of the participants. In contrast, most participants (76.2 %) agreed that using GenAI-generated texts in their manuscript directly without revisions is inappropriate or completely inappropriate.

In the interview, many participants maintained that employing GenAI tools during the drafting stage of academic writing is appropriate. They argued that GenAI can be used to generate aspect of their manuscript could provide benefits. Michael, for example, stated, "I'm a pragmatist. I think this is totally fine as long as it is helpful to efficiently facilitate the academic output. But you need to declare". Additionally, several participants considered it acceptable to use GenAI-generated content, but they emphasized "the need to paraphrase before including it in the manuscript."

However, other participants deemed that allowing GenAI to compose manuscripts is not appropriate. Elizabeth (a second-year PhD student in sports, psychical education, and health) highlighted that the writing style of GenAI tools differs from human authors so that "it can be easily identified". Some participants raised concerns about authorship and questioned whether the content generated by GenAI truly belongs to the researcher. For example, David (a first-year PhD student in government and international studies) remarked, "If it is generated by GenAI, it is difficult to convince others that the content is yours." Further, there were worries about potential plagiarism, with Sarah (a second-year PhD student in social work) noting, "The generated sentences are not the authors, and using these in their manuscript is no difference with plagiarism".

3.3. Revising and editing

The survey responses illustrated that there were differences among participants' perceived appropriateness of the application of GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes in the revising and editing stages (see Table 5). Using GenAI to revise manuscript directly was regarded as inappropriate (19.1 %) or completely inappropriate (50.8 %), although others remained neutral (20.6 %) or considered it appropriate (9.5 %). Additionally, contrasting viewpoints were recognized with respect to using GenAI to provide corrective feedback based on the evaluation rubric they provided, with 44.4 % appropriate or completely appropriate, and 35.0 % inappropriate or completely inappropriate. While the majority of the participants 77.8 % believed that using GenAI to proofread typos or grammar mistakes was appropriate or completely appropriate, there was still some participants viewing this is inappropriate (3.2 %) or completely inappropriate (4.8 %). Likewise, 77.8 % believed that it was appropriate or completely appropriate to use GenAI to proofread the wording, lexical choice, and sentence structures for improving authenticity of the language of their manuscript, whereas others were neutral or believed it inappropriate.

Interviewed participants contended that using GenAI tools for revising and editing academic work is appropriate. They generally believed that GenAI tools only improve the language of the manuscript for readability without altering the content, meaning, or originality. For example, Emily (a first-year PhD student in film studies) noted, "GenAI tools do not revise the original ideas and logic. They merely play a role of language refinement." Participants, such as Michael, acknowledged the high language editing capabilities of GenAI, which can "reduce the language gap between native and non-native English speakers", thus "removing barriers in academic writing". Some participants appreciated the 24/7 availability of GenAI and viewed it as an alternative to feedback from supervisors. Yvonne explained, "When my supervisor does not have time to provide detailed suggestions, GenAI tools can serve as a personalized language tutor to assist with revisions and language editing."

Table 5
Perceived appropriateness at revising and editing stages.

Use of GenAI	Completely inappropriate	Inappropriate	Neutral	Appropriate	Completely appropriate
Revise manuscript directly	32 (50.8 %)	12 (19.1 %)	13 (20.6 %)	6 (9.5 %)	0 (0.0 %)
Offer an evaluation rubric to GenAI and ask GenAI to offer corrective feedback for revisions	11 (17.5 %)	11 (17.5 %)	13 (20.6 %)	23 (36.5 %)	5 (7.9 %)
Proofread typos and grammar mistakes	3 (4.8 %)	2 (3.2 %)	9 (14.3 %)	19 (30.2 %)	30 (47.6 %)
Proofread wording, lexical choice, and sentence structures to improve authenticity	2 (3.2 %)	5 (7.9 %)	7 (11.1 %)	25 (39.7 %)	24 (38.1 %)

Conversely, some participants felt that using GenAI tools during the revising and editing stages was inappropriate. A primary concern was the potential for information leakage when manuscripts were uploaded to GenAI platforms. Additionally, there were apprehensions regarding the responsibility and accountability for the revised content, as GenAI cannot assume these roles. Some participants also believed that the quality of the GenAI-generated corrective feedback was unsatisfactory. Jason (a second-year PhD student in communication), for example, mentioned, "GenAI feedback is useless because they are too general and not specific enough."

3.4. Transparency, honesty and declaration of AI use

Participants' understanding of transparency and honesty in terms of the use of GenAI in their manuscripts is illustrated in Table 6, as derived from survey data. Over 70 % of participants agree or strongly agree that the use of GenAI tools in academic writing should always be disclosed, whereas 27.0 % expressed a neutral stance on this issue. Notably, only one participant (1.6 %) strongly disagreed. Most participants (over 90 %) agreed or strongly agreed that they should abide by the guidelines and policies about GenAI tools published by journals on how to properly disclose and justify the use of GenAI tools when submitting the manuscript for publication, while others were neutral (6.4 %) or disagree (1.6 %). Similarly, nearly 90 % of participants argued that it is unethical to submit GenAI-generated content as original work without declaration, whereas 7.9 % were neutral and 4.8 % disagreed or strongly disagreed. The majority of the participants (96.8 %) believed that honesty about the use of GenAI tools is crucial for maintaining academic integrity, and the remaining (3.2 %) had a neutral attitude.

The survey respondents expressed varying opinions about the necessity of declaring the use of GenAI at different stages of preparing their manuscripts for publication purposes (see Table 7). Many participants were in favor of the declaration of AI usage in academic writing, with the percentages at the conceptualizing, drafting, revising, and editing stages being 46.0 %, 39.7 %, and 39.7 %, respectively. Conversely, other participants believed that the declaration of AI use was unnecessary, with the proportions at the same stages being 54.0 %, 60.3 %, and 60.3 %. These contrasting views implied the ongoing debate surrounding transparency in the use of AI in academic writing.

The analysis of interview data showed that most participants emphasized the importance of transparency and honesty to uphold academic integrity. They showed the awareness of explicitly stating their AI use and abiding by the journals' AI guidelines. Some participants explained that it is necessary to declare their AI use in academic writing to acknowledge their contributions to their academic work. Nancy said, "GenAI helped me finish plenty of work, so I should declare them." Charlotte underscored the significance of academic integrity, stating "This is an issue of academic integrity. If you used something not produced by yourself, you should let the readers know."

Despite the consensus on the importance of transparency and honesty, many participants still felt it unnecessary to declare AI use for various reasons. In the conceptualizing stage, some participants compared using GenAI tools for brainstorming ideas or generating outlines to traditional search engines like Google or consulting supervisors and argued that there is no need to declare. Yvonne questioned, "If I used Google to brainstorm ideas for my manuscript, do I need to declare the use of Google?" Some participants, like John, worried that declaring AI use at the conceptualizing stage might lead to doubts about the originality of their manuscript and negative judgment on their reputation and academic work since "ideas are very important for academic articles."

At the drafting stage, some participants believed that it was unnecessary to declare the use of GenAI at the drafting stage. Ethan (a second-year PhD student in film studies) explained "Original ideas are more important than original language for an article. It doesn't matter whether I used AI for writing as long as I can present innovative ideas and perspectives."

In the revising and drafting stage, participants felt that using GenAI tools to reduce language discrepancies between L1 and L2 writers did not necessitate declaration. Some also believed that using GenAI-generated feedback for refinement is similar to seeking feedback from supervisors or peers. Nancy stated, "You wouldn't declare the use of peer feedback for refinement. Similarly, there's no need to declare the use of GenAI for feedback and language refinement."

3.5. Inaccurate and unreliable results of AI detection tools

Participants, during the interview, unanimously criticized the accuracy and reliability of AI detection tools. Albert (a second-year PhD student in sports, psychical education, and health) shared his frustration and complained, "I found AI detection tools were

Table 6
Perceived transparency and honesty.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The use of GenAI tools in academic writing should always be disclosed	1 (1.6 %)	0 (0.0 %)	17 (27.0 %)	20 (31.8 %)	25 (39.7 %)
Guidelines and policies about GenAI tools published by journals on how to properly disclose and justify the use of GenAI tools should be abide by when submitting the manuscript	0 (0.0 %)	1 (1.6 %)	4 (6.4 %)	20 (31.8 %)	38 (60.3 %)
It is unethical to submit GenAI-generated content as original work without declaration	2 (3.2 %)	1 (1.6 %)	5 (7.9 %)	20 (31.8 %)	35 (55.6 %)
Honesty about the use of GenAI tools is crucial for maintaining academic integrity	0 (0.0 %)	0 (0.0 %)	2 (3.2 %)	14 (22.2 %)	47 (74.6 %)

Table 7
Necessity of declaration of AI use.

Items	Necessary to declare	Unnecessary to declare
I use GenAI tools in the conceptualizing stage (i.e., generate research topics, ideas, and outlines)	29 (46.0 %)	34 (54.0 %)
I use GenAI tools in the drafting stage (i.e., generate a sentence, a paragraph, etc.)	25 (39.7 %)	38 (60.3 %)
I use GenAI tools in the revising and editing stage (i.e., generate corrective feedback, and proofread typos and grammar mistakes, etc.)	25 (39.7 %)	38 (60.3 %)

unreliable. I checked a piece of writing written on my own, but the tool reported a 40 % AI rate. After revising my writing based on the report, the AI rate even rose to 60 %." Additionally, some participants noted that different AI detection tools could give completely different AI rates for the same manuscript, and this further increased their concerns about these tools' accuracy and reliability.

4. Discussion

GenAI tools have led to a fundamental shift in how we approach the writing process. No longer are these technologies just tools to support our writing clarity and accuracy; they are now capable of composing full, coherent texts on a variety of academic topics. The rapid development of these tools has outpaced our understanding of ethical appropriateness, leaving many questions in our minds about the role the tools should take in our publication processes (Belcher, 2024).

At the front line of this uncertainty are L2 PhD students who are trying to navigate the demands of their programmes, fulfill requirements for academic posts, and their own experiences and perceptions around GenAI tools (English et al., 2025; Shamsi & Osam, 2022). EAP courses and instructors have a responsibility to innovate in response to these changes and support L2 PhD.

The findings provide a holistic overview of L2 PhD students' use of GenAI for writing for publication, a key task of PhD students, and their sense of appropriate use, these insights can help guide EAP instructors and courses to engage in reforms that align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment with current practices and perceptions. Drawing on our findings, we proposed a set of six recommendations for EAP instructors and course leaders to guide L2 students to use GenAI tools appropriately to support academic writing for publishing.

4.1. Recommendation 1: acknowledge the complexities of writing for publication in the age of GenAI

The findings highlight the current lack of consensus regarding the use of GenAI in writing for publication. In almost all stages of the writing process, there was ambiguity among the L2 PhD students regarding what they perceived to be appropriate and inappropriate use.

According to the findings obtained from the interviews, the discrepancy in their perceptions may stem from their different experiences and frequency of using GenAI, differing levels of familiarity and expertise with GenAI tools, the disciplines they study, their level of critical awareness, and their previous experiences of academic publishing. For example, those who are more experienced and knowledgeable about using GenAI may have a more critical and holistic understanding of GenAI, while novices might see these tools as more beneficial. The findings align with studies exploring students' perceptions of GenAI-assisted writing (Giray, 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Naddaf, 2025; Wang, 2024).

This understanding places an important responsibility on EAP instructors and courses. They may consider assisting students to navigate the complexities with the aim of giving them the skills and knowledge needed to make informed decisions about their use of GenAI. Case examples could be integrated into EAP courses that provide opportunities to discuss the variables that may make one use of AI appropriate (e.g., paraphrasing), while a similar use may not be appropriate (e.g., constructing a paragraph automatically and using it directly). At the same time, as they support students to engage in different stages of the writing process, they can engage students in debates about the specific ways GenAI may be integrated into the stages.

4.2. Recommendation 2: raise students' awareness of the institutional, journal, and publishers' policies on GenAI

Added to the complexity above is the reality that L2 PhD students need to understand and comply with various institutional, journal, and publisher guidelines and policies on GenAI when they write for publication. Transparency has become a widely accepted standard among scholars and academic publishers, and being transparent in disclosing the utilization of GenAI in the writing process is crucial for maintaining academic integrity (Tan et al., 2025; Barrett & Pack, 2023; Moorhouse, Nejadghanbar, & Yeo, 2025).

Survey results showed that the majority of the participants recognized the importance of transparency and honesty and the necessity of AI declaration. Nonetheless, when asked whether they would declare the use of GenAI upon submitting their manuscripts for publication, approximately forty percent chose not to disclose their AI usage. According to participants' responses during interviews, this decision was driven by either a belief in the unnecessary nature of such declarations or concerns about the potential negative impact on their reputation and research, which was consistent with Mahmud (2024).

Indeed, the findings highlight that PhD students were aware of their responsibility to be transparent in their use of GenAI, as the literature shows, they need clarity in the journal guidelines and a belief that they will be treated fairly if they disclose. Although COPE (2023) suggests any such disclosure should happen in the Methods section of a manuscript, many journals, instead, have a declaration

statement that authors need to submit. In addition, what uses of GenAI need to be declared can vary between journals and publishers (Hysaj et al., 2025).

EAP instructors and courses may consider integrating activities that build L2 PhD awareness of the different policies on GenAI. These could include asking them to research the availability and details of policies on impactful journals in their field of study. Becoming familiar with journal requirements and conventions could enhance their training for writing for publication. Advice on how to declare the use of GenAI can also be provided with model texts, templates, or a bank of examples from published articles. See Moorhouse, Wan, et al. (2025) for an example of how GenAI use can be declared in the Methods section of a manuscript.

4.3. Recommendation 3: prioritizing human accountability and choice

GenAI tools have a 'wow' effect, and the current marketing of GenAI tools by technology companies has focused on how they support efficacy and automation. When the tools provide professionally looking and authoritative responses, users can become less critical of the tools and cognitively offload to the tools (Moorhouse & Nejadghanbar, 2025).

Our study reveals that, despite discrepancies in their opinions, some participants felt comfortable utilizing the tools for idea generation and brainstorming. While these uses may be morally appropriate and not violate any guidelines, they may lead the L2 PhD student to over-rely on the tools, and, in some cases, they may not cognitively engage with the thinking and writing process. This could also be true if they ask an AI tool to rewrite their text to improve the clarity. They may not acquire the same skills or knowledge as if they had done it themselves.

EAP instructors and courses may consider integrating activities that demonstrate ways L2 PhD students can retain human accountability over their writing processes and be the key agent through making informed choices and decisions about the content, form, and organization of their texts (Belcher, 2024). For example, L2 PhD students can be taught how to interact with GenAI tools in a way that they act as a tutor providing advice and suggestions on the text, rather than rewriting the text. EAP instructors can also raise students' awareness of how these tools can prioritize standard forms of language, which may marginalize certain varieties of English and prevent L2 writers from developing their own voice and style (Kuteeva & Andersson, 2024).

4.4. Recommendation 4: build knowledge of different GenAI tools and their affordances

GenAI tools are often treated as homogeneous tools. Yet, with the increase in the diversity of tools, and tools for specific research related functions (e.g., SCOPUS AI), L2 writers may need to receive training on the different tools as well as their affordances in relation to different academic tasks. For example, SCOPUS AI, generates summaries from texts in its academic database and cites the original source. While the tool has limitations (e.g., how it selects articles is not transparent, with summaries often overselling the implications of the literature it sources) (Moorhouse, Nejadghanbar, & Yeo, 2025), it could play a role in L2 PhD students' writing process.

Our findings show that most respondents feel it is inappropriate to search for information using GenAI without verifying the sources. In follow-up interviews, many participants elaborated on this perspective and expressed concerns about the quality, authenticity, and timeliness of the information generated by GenAI. Similarly, tools like MAXQDA and NVivo have built-in AI features that automate some of the coding processes. Tools such as Google's NotebookLM can help L2 writers access information in different modalities (Yeo et al., 2025). Different versions of GenAI-chatbots (e.g., GPT5 and GPT5-mini) have different utilities that affect their performance in different tasks.

EAP instructors and courses may consider exposing students to a wide range of GenAI tools that can be used as part of the writing processes and develop activities that help them to recognize the affordances and limitations of the different tools. Knowledge about the way the tools work and the features of different tools can also be provided (e.g., context window, algorithms) – creating more critical engagement with the tools (Pack & Maloney, 2024). A course session could be dedicated to exploring tools and considering how they could contribute to the writing process. Suggestions for how limitations can be mitigated could also be provided. For example, using multiple AI tools or using manual methods to verify outputs from LLMs.

4.5. Recommendation 5: incorporate explicit training on prompt literacy

The findings indicate the importance of including explicit instructions on students' AI interactional competence in EAP courses. Some interview participants reported dissatisfaction with the quality of responses generated by GenAI. They noted that in many cases the corrective feedback provided tended to be overly general and lacked the specificity necessary for meaningful improvement. This maybe because GenAI tools often rely on pattern recognition and predefined rules to generate feedback. While they can identify common errors in academic writing, they may struggle to provide nuanced, detailed feedback tailored to individual writing styles or specific contexts.

However, previous studies suggested that if users can provide detailed quality input to guide the feedback process, GenAI tools were able to generate specific and contextualized corrective feedback (Evmenova et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025), since the quality and clarity of prompts significantly influence the quality and relevance of GenAI responses (Moorhouse, Ho, et al., 2025). Echoing this point, some interview participants recognized that the general and unsatisfactory GenAI responses might result from their limited prompt literacy, and they expressed a strong interest in receiving training to enhance this skill.

This suggests that EAP courses may need to consider providing guidance to students on how to interact effectively with GenAI tools. EAP instructors could demonstrate different prompting practices and provide hands-on sessions where L2 PhD students work with a GenAI tool to solve a problem or complete a task – then reflect on the quality of their outcomes based on their interactions with the

tools. See Wan et al. (2025) for an example workshop developed for postgraduate students on using GenAI for academic writing that could be adapted for other courses.

4.6. Recommendation 6: tailor EAP training for students in different subject areas

The findings reinforce the argument that, in many cases, EAP courses should be customized to meet the specific needs of students in different academic disciplines. The interview findings revealed that the affordances of GenAI tools vary across disciplines. For example, students in disciplines, such as education, psychology, translation, and social work, expressed generally positive feedback regarding GenAI's capabilities.

However, those who specialized in history found GenAI's ideas less useful for historical studies, since they felt that the GenAI tools' databases tend to focus on contemporary information and offer limited details about the past. Students felt GenAI tools demonstrated proficiency in generating high-quality ideas using GenAI in some fields, while underperforming in others. This led to different perceptions about what are appropriate uses of GenAI in academic writing and what are not among students in different subject areas.

EAP instructors and courses may consider the different academic traditions of different disciplines, as well as research and writing conventions in these disciplines, and tailor the support to the disciplines. EAP teachers can also incorporate discipline-specific workshops or seminars into the EAP curriculum, where students critically analyze and discuss the role and appropriate use of GenAI tools within their specific fields of study.

5. Conclusion

The study explored the perceived appropriateness of using GenAI tools in academic writing for publication purposes among doctoral students in arts, humanities, and social sciences at a Hong Kong university. The findings revealed divergent perspectives about the appropriateness of GenAI use at various stages of academic writing. Although participants emphasized the importance of transparency and AI declarations, many chose not to explicitly disclose some GenAI uses and provided detailed explanations for their decisions during interviews. Additionally, in interviews, concerns about the accuracy and reliability of AI detection tools were unanimously identified. Drawing on the findings, six recommendations were made for ways EAP courses may be innovative in response to the developments of GenAI:

(1) Acknowledge the complexities of writing for publication in the age of GenAI.
(2) Raise students' awareness of the institutional, journal, and publishers' policies on GenAI.
(3) Prioritizing human accountability and choice.
(4) Build knowledge of different GenAI tools and their affordances.
(5) Incorporate explicit training on prompt literacy.
(6) Tailor EAP training for students in different subject areas.

We encourage EAP instructors and leaders to examine our recommendations and make changes to their courses to reflect GenAI developments.

The study has several limitations. First, although this study recruited doctoral students in various disciplines within the arts, humanities, and social sciences, all participants were from a single university in Hong Kong. This may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further studies should recruit doctoral students from different universities and more diverse contexts to have a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Second, this study explored the perspectives of doctoral students about the appropriateness of using GenAI in academic writing for publication purposes. However, other stakeholders in academic publishing, such as university professors and journal editors, may hold different views. Further studies are recommended that include different stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Chenze Wu: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Benjamin Luke Moorhouse:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Yuwei Wan:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Meixin Wu:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Generative AI statement

During the drafting of the manuscript, GPT4.1 from OpenAI and Grammarly were utilized to enhance language and clarity. Their use did not extend to any aspect of the research process, such as data analysis or interpretation. After using the tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content, taking full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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Chenze WU is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education and Psychology at Hong Kong Baptist University, China. His research interests include the integration of GenAI into the writing process. He has published articles in *System, RELC Journal*, and *Journal of Second Language Writing*.

Benjamin Luke Moorhouse SFHEA is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong. His research focuses on the impacts of GenAI on language teaching and learning. Benjamin's research has appeared in international journals, including *System, TESOL Quarterly, RELC Journal,* and *ELT Journal*.

Yuwei WAN is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education and Psychology at Hong Kong Baptist University, China. Her research interests include teachers' AI literacy, technology in language teaching and learning, and professional development for language teachers. Yuwei's research has appeared in *Computer and Education Open*, *System,* and *RELC Journal.*

Meixin WU is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education and Psychology at Hong Kong Baptist University, China. Her research interests include L2 motivation and the use of GenAI in language teaching. She has published in *RELC Journal* and *Digital Applied Linguistics*.